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What If They *Can't*?

In the beginning . . . “This is the dumb class, isn’t it? I hate to read and I ain’t writin’!” eighth-grader Miguel announced as he sauntered into my class on the first day of school. Fourteen heads nodded in the background. For the rest of the two periods—I looked at them and they looked at me—daring me to try and teach them anything. Everything I attempted was met with, “I can’t . . .” or “I ain’t doin’ that!”

“What have I done?” I cried to my husband as thoughts of early retirement—or termination—danced before my eyes. “I begged for this class. I begged for two hours every day! I guaranteed the principal that if he gave me this class, we *would* raise our state test scores! And now I’m stuck with kids who failed the standardized tests and hate to read and write for *two whole hours*! I just can’t do it! I’m dead!”

My husband nodded and smiled his “she’ll-be-over-it-tomorrow” smile.

But I was not over it the next day, or the next, or the next. For two weeks—tricks that had proven successful in the past got us nowhere. Twenty years of experience under my belt and I *could not* get the kids to perform academically. As a result, behavior continued to get worse and worse. This did not usually happen in my class. What was I doing wrong?

I knew I was not alone when I read an article by Donald Murray (1993). “We command our students to write and grow frustrated when our ‘bad

students hesitate, stare out the window, dawdle over blank paper, give up and say, “I can’t write . . .” (p. 85). I began to watch my kids more closely to see where the breakdown was occurring. If we were discussing orally, they were fine. If the activity involved reading or writing, the class transformed into monsters right before my eyes! It was then I had a revelation. *Could* my eighth graders read and/or comprehend material at grade level? If not, at what level could they (would they) work independently? Over the course of the next couple days, various diagnostic assessments revealed the majority of these kids were reading at a third-grade level. When I started handing them activities they could actually complete—the whole atmosphere of the class changed. The kids *worked*, without noise or comment.

That solution, however, brought many more problems. Exactly how was I going to get a group of low-performing eighth graders ready for the standardized tests without demeaning them by using third-grade materials? Frank Smith (quoted in Rief, 1992, p. 2) stated, “Nothing can be taught unless it has the potential of making sense to the learner. . . .” I had to find a way to help Miguel and the rest of my students make sense out of reading and writing.

We started with discussions and journals. We talked about the school dress code, world events, things they were afraid of, things they considered stupid, the death penalty, etc. I shared articles from the newspaper in an attempt to stir up controversy that would get the students talking. The more they utilized the verbal thought, or meaningful speech (Vygotsky, 2002), and received validation by classmates or myself, the more confident they became.

Students who rarely said anything aloud began to share when we managed to find a topic that stirred their passion.

Discussions were eventually followed by journal writing. The kids had already voiced their ideas and opinions verbally, so putting them on paper didn't seem quite so threatening. The writing mechanics were horrendous, but the ideas were there. The kids *were* writing. *We were* making progress. Initially I wrote a comment on every entry just to let the kids know the writing they were doing was important. Did it take a lot of time? Hours. Was it worth it? Definitely. "A teacher, any teacher, but especially a language arts teacher, is in an excellent position to show students that someone is interested in what they have to say, that there are adults who care about more than the propriety of their language and the correctness of writing forms" (Romano, 1987).

The crowning glory of our writing came in the manner of Coffee House. A coffee house was held every six weeks in my classroom. Each house had a different theme—Beatnik Bungalow, Hippie Hut, Granny's Garden Cafe, The Rah-Rah Room, Wizardina's Wishing Well, and whatever else I chose to add (or costumes I could find in the clearance bin after Halloween!). Students were allowed to bring snacks and drinks as long as they brought writing to share. I pushed desks together, covered them with shower curtains, (they were much more durable than plastic table cloths) and battery-powered candles. Music played in the background to fit the theme. I also dressed to fit the theme. I had wigs and shoes, jewelry and various prompts to make the costume more realistic.

I started off by reading my own writing. (Finger snaps show appreciation.) Donald Graves stresses there is no more powerful tool than teachers modeling the writing process for students. I always reminded the kids they didn't have to worry about looking "dumb" because I had that covered. It seemed to ease the tension. Fellow classmates shared positive comments following each person's writing. Coffee House started as a one-time experiment several years ago. Due to popular demand, it has remained a regular event.

Teachers ask, "What do you do if someone won't share?" Believe it or not, that hasn't been much of a problem. Before the first coffee house, I tell the kids that this is the first time for everyone, so everyone has some insecurities about sharing with peers. If they choose not to read—it only happens one time. After they hear the positive comments and other students saying, "That wasn't so bad," they make sure they have something to read the next time. Through the course of the year, students begin to realize that writing doesn't have to be total drudgery. Some people begin to realize it's somewhat therapeutic as they put their thoughts on paper. Students have shared humorous tales of accidentally setting a field on fire with fireworks, being afraid of a teacher when they were younger, stitches and broken bones, being grounded for life. Kids also begin to write from the heart as they share stories of divorce, problems with friends or parents, the stress of balancing so many things at one time. One young man, who had done little else all year and who was a virtual stranger to positive reinforcement, shared his emotionally powerful piece with the class. When his peers offered words of support and encouragement, you could just feel his confidence grow. He did very little writing for me the rest of the year—except for coffee house. If dressing up and looking ridiculous encourages kids to write and share themselves with others, it's a small price to pay, because we all do have a story to tell.

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And then there were picture books . . .

After the first sharing experience, it was obvious the students needed some very basic writing skills, but they had to see those skills as relevant—not a waste of their time. That is how my picture book project came into being. Having been an elementary teacher, I knew there was always a need for

reading material for beginning readers. I decided that was how I would teach writing to my students: They would create picture books for younger students. Kindergarten teachers in our feeder school were enthusiastic about the idea. They sent me topics their children were interested in and vocabulary words their children were working on.

Before we start on any project, we analyze how published authors write. We read picture books, excerpts from novels, poems, anything that gives students examples of powerful writing. Next, stu-

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dents began working on their own books. My first attempts at doing this with students predated any use of technology as I first had students illustrating by hand and literally cutting and pasting the text onto the page. But we’ve come

a long way (baby!); now our books are created using PowerPoint.

Through trial and error, the first book my class now works on is a preposition book. Students choose a topic such as “Bugs and Insects.” They find pictures on the Internet, insert them into their documents, then write a sentence using three prepositional phrases, each in a different color. (Example: The ladybug flew *across the yard, through the window, and onto the kitchen table.*) This particular book helps our young readers with some of those relationship words. My kids worked on sentence structure, punctuation, prepositional phrases, subjects and predicates, etc. The final step to completing the book is creating an audiotape that will also be given to the kindergarten students. With background music playing, my kids will read and reread to get their book “just right,” reinforcing enunciation and fluency.

Following completion, my middle schoolers meet the kindergartners. Upon the first meeting, my students are amazed at how small (and how mighty) these little people are. Last year after we had put the students into groups, I heard a very shaky sounding, “Mrs. Muuuuuueller . . .” Kurt, a stocky young man, appeared somewhat shaken as

he sat on the floor surrounded by three small ones. One little girl was playing with his hair, another was stroking his arm, the third just sat and smiled. After a moment or two of reassurance, Kurt continued sharing his book with the children.

Miguel, my “I-hate-to-read guy,” was caught off guard when one of the kindergarten students looked up at him and asked, “What is your favorite book?” Panic-stricken, Miguel looked at me, then replied, “I’ll tell you later.” As we walked back to school, he asked me, “We are really setting an example for these little guys, aren’t we? That’s why our books have to be written the right way. I’ve never read a whole book, Miss. What am I going to tell that little guy?”

“Gee, Miguel. I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I think I’d better start reading. Can you tell me some good ones?” Miguel went on to read 13 books that year—just so he could tell his little friend what his favorite book was.

Another book my class works on is an “I Spy” book. Students pick a theme and bring items that fall into that theme. Digital cameras have been working their way into my books more and more. The kids take pictures of their items and, using PowerPoint, insert their pictures into their document; then they write couplets instructing readers what they should be looking for. One of my groups brought all types of small food—Cheerios, Goldfish, Gummy Worms, Gummy Bears, etc. An example of a couplet used was, “Many fish shapes I can spot. How many can you find shaped like a dot?” (Answers are recorded on the back.) Again, many skills are covered: rhyming, rhythm in sentences, asking questions, etc. These projects also help to keep kids focused in their writing.

I was always so irritated when students would sit and stare out the window. When questioned, they would respond, “I’m thinking, Miss.” Then after a while, they would begin to write. I began to make connections with my own writing. So much of it has been “prewritten” in my head before I ever touch a pen or pencil. Tom Romano refers to this as “percolating.” “Percolating prepares writers to write. Writers percolate when they

sit back from their drafts and reread and consider their words and thinking” (Romano, p. 39). In Linda Rief’s book *Seeking Diversity*, she states that “Creating is the highest form of intellectual development” (1992, p. 149). Even with all the pressures from benchmarks and standardized testing, kids need time to think if we want them to write and write well.

A third type of story my class writes is a mystery. We read picture books and look for examples in our classroom library to determine which elements should be in a mystery. Students complete a story map during which they decide on setting, develop characters, identify conflict, and establish plot and resolution before their pencils write the first word of their stories. Again, students take pictures with digital cameras. They have created characters from Legos, sticks, coca cola cans—the sky’s the limit. Following one session with our little readers, one of my young men commented, “Miss, I think someday I might write children’s books. (pause) But I’m *never* havin’ any kids. They wear me out!”

The book we write at the end of the year is a nonfiction True/False book. Keeping their younger audience in mind, the eighth graders select a topic they think their young audience will enjoy. Books range from Polar Bears to Popcorn to M & Ms, all done on PowerPoint. We make lists of questions to help narrow the focus of the book; then students gather information from the Web by cutting and pasting the needed parts into a Word document. Not only are the required research skills incorporated into this project, but comprehension skills are practiced as my students must then paraphrase the information into words their little readers will understand. Page 1, after the title page, is a summary of the information the students deemed important. Page 2 has a true/false statement with the answer (and rationale) on the back. There are a total of 10 true/false statements. All answers can be found in the text—teaching our young counterparts about textual evidence while reinforcing the skill with my own students. Pictures are also inserted throughout the book.

One day a person asked me how many minor-

ity students I had in my classes. I couldn’t answer her, because I don’t see color or race. I just know that 130 unique, young adults walk into my classroom each day. The beauty of my children’s book project is that all students in my two-period block class can participate, regardless of ethnicity or reading level. We simply begin with where each student is, be it third-grade level or sixth. That means I do a lot of running—from computer to computer—to help with grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, capitalization, and any other skill the kids are expected to master in eighth grade.

They all lived happily ever after . . .

My goal when requesting this class was to raise test scores. The first year, many scores went up, but only 4 students actually passed. Last year, 11 out of 15 students passed the state-mandated standardized reading test. But through the years, there have been other changes taking place in my students, changes that won’t show up in test scores. I’ve seen students walk into my classroom defeated, feeling they have nothing important to say or that no one will listen, who sit up straighter when asked for an opinion. I’ve seen them bring in newspaper articles about something we’ve discussed in class. They start asking, “Did you see on the news last night . . .?”

“Do we *have* to read?” has now become “Do we *get* to read?” Students who claimed they couldn’t write are now volunteering to read their pieces first. The changes are getting noticed by those on “the outside.” In the beginning, my kids were asking, “Why do we have to be in this class?” Their successors are now asking, “How do we get into this class?”

Serena exemplifies the most obvious change. When asked at the end of the year what the kids felt they had accomplished, Serena smiled, pulled

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one of her books from the back of her notebook, waved it in the air, and responded, “Remember at the beginning of the year when I couldn’t read or write very well? Well, now I’m a writer. I wrote a book and it got published. Kids are reading it. How many others in the eighth grade can say that?”

She’s right.

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